

# The land, the sea and the eight-pointed cross: economy and material life in mid-16<sup>th</sup> century Malta

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## Introduction - sources and context

While extensive use has been made of notarial acts for the reconstruction of late Medieval aspects of life, their use for the Early Modern period has so far been limited.<sup>1</sup> The themes to be discussed in this article transpire from the notarial deeds of Notary Juliano Muscat for the years 1545 and 1546. Notary Muscat was a highly respected and well-connected man in society. His terms of reference stated that he was allowed to practice his notarial profession throughout the lands held by the Knights Hospitallers<sup>2</sup> and his clientele included such prominent persons as the Reverend Domenico Cubelles, Bishop of Malta,<sup>3</sup> and the Noble Nicola Camilleri, Mayor of Mdina.<sup>4</sup>

The choice of such a primary source lies in the significance of notaries as links in the chain of everyday life. It was their profession which gave a certain stability to society in that the keeping of written records allowed for a more sedentary way of life for businessmen and others. Having formed such an intimate and integral part of Mediterranean Medieval and Early Modern societies, the records left by notaries are crucial to the reconstruction of these same societies.<sup>5</sup> These therefore allow us to widen our understanding of the Medieval and Early Modern

economy, so that we can better grasp how sophisticated were the systems of exchange in operation.

Although mid-sixteenth-century Malta was not placed on any of the major commercial sea routes, its commercial transactions were enough to sustain the rise and prosperity of a class of merchants, in Birgu in particular, but also in Mdina and elsewhere. At this time, nothing secured or threatened socio-political stability so frequently as the operations of market arrangements for the buying and selling of grain stuffs and the sale of bread.<sup>6</sup> The bulk of trade in the acts of Notary Muscat was thus concerned with cereals. Although in Figure 1 the trade in cereals takes up only a 10% segment, Table 1 shows that its total monetary value was of about 1,226 *uncie* 11 *tareni* – a phenomenal sum, way ahead of the total monetary value of cumin, cotton, textiles, and animals put together.

On the other hand, while the supply of cereals formed the bulk of the import sector of the economy, cumin formed the core of the export sector. The discussion will try to assess, in a given place at a given time, the function that was being fulfilled by the production of cumin and, also of cotton. Tied to this will be a discussion of textiles and their perceived value. Despite the centrality which the provisioning of basic foodstuffs played in trade as a whole, and in the acts of Notary Muscat in particular, almost a quarter of all the commercial transactions carried out involved the selling or buying of textiles, indeed in a lot of cases, of high quality items. All this has to be seen within the wider interaction of the land and the sea as economic sectors that were fast changing under the new political scenario created by the arrival of the Knights of St John in Malta.

## The trade in cereals

According to Braudel, the annual consumption per head of wheat and other cereals in the sixteenth-century Mediterranean was of the order of two

1 E. Buttigieg, 'Church Bells and Street Fighting: Birkirkara and Don Joannes Matheo Camilleri (1545 – 57)'. In H. Frendo (ed.), *Storja 2003-2004* (Malta, 2004), 34.

2 N(otarial)A(rchives)V(alletta), N(otary)J(uliano)M(uscat), R376/11, ff. 524-527v, (23.ii.1545).

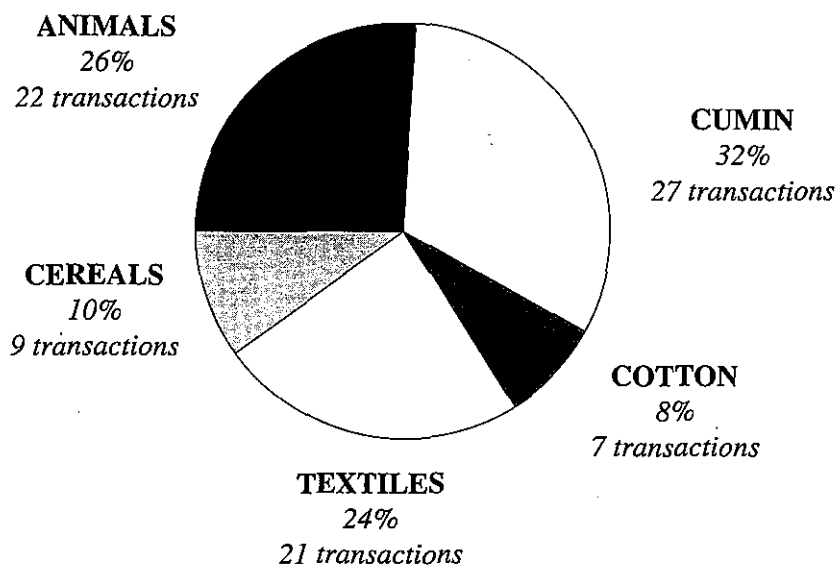
3 NAV, NJM, R376/11, ff. 841v-843v, (6.vii.1545).

4 NAV, NJM, R376/11, ff. 549v-550v, (2.iii.1545).

5 C. Violante, *Atti Privati e Storia Medievale, Problemi di Metodo*, [Fonti e Studi del Corpus membranarum italicarum], (Rome, 1982). Note Violante's emphasis on the private nature of notarial records in the very title of his work.

6 P. Camporesi, *Bread of Dreams - Food and Fantasy in Early Modern Europe* (Great Britain, 1996), 13.

**Figure 1**  
**Profile of the 86 commercial transactions in the**  
**Acts of Notary Juliano Muscat, R376/11, 1545.**



**Table 1**  
**Total monetary value of goods traded as extrapolated**  
**from the Acts of Notary Juliano Muscat, R376/11, 1545.**

<i>Goods Traded</i>	<i>Number of Transactions</i>	<i>Total Value of Traded Goods</i>
Cumin	27	79.15 uncie
Cotton	7	20.29.10 uncie
Textiles	21	73.18.13 uncie
Animals	22	79.1 uncie
Cereals bought by private individuals.	6	8.11 uncie
Cereals bought by the <i>Universitas</i> .	3	c. 1,218 uncie <sup>7</sup>
Cereals (total bought by both private individuals and the <i>Universitas</i> ).	9	c. 1,226.11 uncie

<sup>7</sup> The three acts in which the *Universitas* appears buying cereals are NAV, NJM, R376/11, f. 501v, (8.ii.1545); NAV, NJM, R376/11, ff. 652v-654v, (10.iv.1545); NAV, NJM, R376/11, ff. 701v-702v, (22.iv.1545). The monetary value given here has to be approximate because in the last act mentioned, the monetary value was not stated in the act but calculated by the present author.

(present day) quintals.<sup>8</sup> Wettinger estimates that by 1530 the two islands were having to import some 9,000 *salme* of wheat annually from Sicily.<sup>9</sup> Epstein has calculated that in Sicily grain exports as a proportion of domestic output reached a peak of 16% to 17% between 1530 and 1550.<sup>10</sup> Blouet quotes Bosio as stating that in the years preceding the Great Siege, the Island produced 20,000 to 25,000 *salme* of wheat, which was sufficient to support the inhabitants for about eight months of the year.<sup>11</sup> These are the parameters within which the discussion will now move.

The term 'cereals' is here being used to denote wheat and barley. These two crops played a crucial role in Mediterranean nutritional systems.<sup>12</sup> In the acts under review, there were two levels to this trade. The first and the predominant level, was concerned with the importation of cereals by the *Universitas* from Licata in Sicily; the second and minor level, concerned a certain amount of internal buying and selling in cereals.

According to Tilly, there existed an intimate relationship between state-making, the maintenance of public order and the control of the food supply. The provisioning of cereals absorbed such a large part of routine governmental work that its study tells us a good deal about the vicissitudes of government in general.<sup>13</sup> In Malta this relationship between the State and the supply of food is clearly evinced in the workings of the *Universitas* and the increasing involvement of the Hospitaller government itself.<sup>14</sup>

The overlapping of the Mdina *Universitas* and the Order in the matter of the importation of cereals comes out in the acts of Notary Muscat. Table 1 shows unequivocally that Notary Muscat was the notary of the *Universitas* especially where the provisioning of cereals was concerned. On 8 February 1545, the *Univertitas* handed over to the Honourable Juliano

Vella of *suburbio* the sum of 233 *uncie* 2 *tareni* to go to Licata to buy 368 *salme* of wheat (*frumentii*). Vella was to hire the Honourable Leonardo de Falson's *grippo* known as 'The Saviour' (*lo salvaturi*) to fetch the grain with it.<sup>15</sup>

A significant shift then occurred in the way the *Universitas* made arrangements for the importation of cereals. Instead of making use of private agents like Juliano Vella and Leonardo de Falson to carry out its business, it started making use of the facilities, services and protection of the fleet of the Order of St John. Thus, on 10 April 1545, the Jurats Antonio Inguanes, Salvo Cumbo and Ivano Cumbo were given the sum of 426 *uncie* and charged to go to Licata on board the *Santa Maria*, a *navis seu barche sacre religionis santi Joannes hiersolimitani*. It was specified that the cargo had to be delivered at Birgu.<sup>16</sup> Twelve days later, the *Universitas* appointed Petro de Falson and Petro Casia to go to Licata on board the *Patronigiata Perandrea* to fetch 1,800 *salme* of grain. They also had to get a rather vague 125 *salme de vaccio Plenori*.<sup>17</sup>

If, according to Braudel, the provisioning of cereals from beyond a 20 to 30 km radius was hazardous,<sup>18</sup> Malta's importation of cereals from 60 km away was indeed a risky business. That the *Universitas* should seek the protection of a formidable fleet like that of the Order to carry out its cereal trade and that the Order should be more than willing to reach out a helping hand seems only natural when one considers the many pirates which constantly threatened the vital Malta-Sicily communications.

Despite the risks involved in such ventures, the sending of a vessel to fetch cereals from Sicily afforded an occasion for private individuals to invest and expect a good return. Some, such as the Noble Simone Bartalo, would invest as much as 156 *uncie* 27 *tareni*; others, such as Josepho Xeberras, would

8 F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, i, (University of California Press, 1995), 42.

9 G. Wettinger, 'Agriculture in Malta in the Late Middle Ages'. In M. Buhagiar (ed.), *Proceedings of History Week, 1981* (Malta, 1982), 14.

10 S.R. Epstein, *An Island for Itself: Economic Development and Social Change in Late Medieval Sicily* (Cambridge, 2003), 407.

11 B. W. Blouet, *The Changing Landscape of Malta during the Rule of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, 1530 - 1798* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Hull, 1964), 59.

12 P. Horden & N. Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford, 2000), 201.

13 C. Tilly, 'Food Supply and Public Order in Modern Europe'. In C. Tilly (ed.), *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton NJ, 1975), 394.

14 C. Cassar, *Society, Culture and Identity in Early Modern Malta* (Malta, 2000), 29-62. K. Gambin & N. Buttigieg, *Storja tal-Kultura ta' l-Ikel f' Malta* (Malta, 2003), 111-4.

15 NAV, NJM, R376/11, f. 501v, (8.ii.1545).

16 NAV, NJM, R376/11, ff. 652v-654v, (10.iv.1545).

17 NAV, NJM, R376/11, ff. 701v-702, (22.iv.1545).

18 F. Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life 1400 - 1800* (London, 1967), 83.

invest as little as 6 *uncie* 10 *tareni*. Even the bishop, through the Vicar-General the Reverend Josepho Manduca invested 3 *uncie* 24 *tareni*.<sup>19</sup>

## Cotton and cumin

Island-societies generally contain some very productive niches, which have sometimes been highly renowned.<sup>20</sup> In Malta's case, its two productive niches were cotton and cumin. Depending on the way they were managed, these cash-crops that were grown to be exported could either threaten the equilibrium of the island's economy or ensure the necessary returns for the island's survival.<sup>21</sup> Sixteenth-century Malta hovered clumsily between these two poles.

Although cotton has generally been regarded as the primary produce of Medieval and Early Modern Malta, the acts under review contained few references to it. For every act dealing with cotton, there were three dealing with cumin, and always of the bitter

kind. According to Wettinger notaries between 1467 and 1501 made more frequent mention of cotton as against cumin.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, the evidence derived from the acts of Notary Muscat and the acts of Notary Nicolò de Agatiis for the years 1538 – 1540<sup>23</sup> make more mention of cumin as against cotton, suggesting a possible – if only temporary – reversal of the domineering position of cotton in the Maltese economy of the 1540s. Further analysis of contemporaneous notarial acts should give a clearer picture.

In fifteenth-century Sicily, Maltese cotton was first bought in Syracuse and then sold elsewhere, particularly in Catalonia.<sup>24</sup> The evidence for the mid-sixteenth century derived from the acts of Notary Muscat presents a much more timid picture. All the seven transactions involving cotton were meant for local consumption and not for export. It was bought either raw or as yarn. Francesco Spiteri of *casal naxaro* (Naxxar) bought 2 *cantari* of raw cotton (*cuttoni in cocchio*) from Demetrio Bortelli of the

**Table 2**  
**A list of the cumin suppliers of the merchant the Noble Nicolo Pellegrino, in the Acts of Notary Juliano Muscat, R376, 1545.**

<i>Seller</i>	<i>Provenance</i>	<i>Quantity</i>	<i>Price</i>	<i>Reference</i>
Berto Bartolo			1.6 <i>uncie</i>	f. 717 <sup>v</sup>
Marino Bortelli	<i>lie</i>		1.16 <i>uncie</i>	f. 685 <sup>v</sup>
Berto Burg	<i>zejtun</i>		1.6 <i>uncie</i>	ff. 678 <sup>v</sup> -679
Georgio Burg	<i>gregorij</i>		1 <i>uncia</i>	f. 679 <sup>v</sup>
Antonio Caruana	<i>pascualino</i>		0.24 <i>uncie</i>	ff. 703 <sup>v</sup> -704
Andrea Cumbo	<i>zebbug</i>		6 <i>uncie</i> ; 1 <i>uncia</i>	ff. 637 <sup>v</sup> -638; f. 694 <sup>v</sup>
Paolo Farrugia	<i>crendi</i>		1.18 <i>uncie</i>	f. 681 <sup>v</sup>
Simone Fava	<i>gregorij</i>	4 <i>cantari</i>	2 <i>uncie</i>	f. 652 <sup>v</sup>
Bartolomeo and Simone Haius	<i>zebbug</i>	6 <i>uncie</i>	f. 669 <sup>v</sup>	
Antonio Manguini	<i>zebbug</i>	5 <i>cantari</i>	3 <i>uncie</i>	ff. 635 <sup>v</sup> -636
Thomaso Pachi	<i>sighewi</i>		2 <i>uncie</i>	f. 714 <sup>v</sup>

19 NAV, NJM, R376/11, f. 501v, (8.ii.1545).

20 Horden & Purcell, 224.

21 Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, 155–7.

22 Wettinger, 'Agriculture ...', 14.

23 D. Bezzina, *Early Hospitaller Birgu: a Study of the Acts of Notary Nicolò de Agatiis, 1538 – 1540* (unpublished B.A. Hons. dissertation, University of Malta, 2001), 93–4.

24 Epstein, *An island for itself – Economic development and social change in late medieval Sicily* (Cambridge, 1992), 186.

same *casale* for 1 *uncia* 21 *tareni*.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, Gratiano Dalli of *casal xiluch* (Hal Xluq) bought a certain quantity of cotton yarn (*cuttoni filati*) from Paolo Bugeia of *casal crendi* (Qrendi) for 1 *uncia* 14 *tareni*.<sup>26</sup>

Whereas the cotton harvest was circulating locally, all the cumin mentioned in the acts under study was exported. The cumin harvest of Malta was highly praised by Abela according to whom "... *ne cavano gl'Isolani molto guadagno e beneficio*".<sup>27</sup> The procedure involved was to have the purchaser who was going to export the cumin to bind his suppliers to have the produce delivered at Birgu, usually on the occasion of the feast of St John the Baptist. Thus, Notary Muscat and his associates in a *societates* that bought cumin for export<sup>28</sup> and sold cloth,<sup>29</sup> bought from Matheo Vella of *casal balezano*, 3 *cantari* of bitter cumin for 1 *uncia* 12 *tareni*. The cumin had to be delivered at Birgu.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the Noble Matheo de Cali bought from Brandano Pachi of *casal bisbut*, 2 *cantari* of bitter cumin for 1 *uncia* 6 *tareni*, in *moneta aurea et argentea*, to be delivered at Birgu.<sup>31</sup>

Obviously, in order for a trading system to work there must be merchants. Unlike the general trend of merchants showing little specialisation in order to spread their risks on a wider base, the Noble Nicolo Pellegrino was a merchant who specialised in cumin. He was the sedentary type of merchant who managed his business from a distance, through notaries and letters. As Table 2 shows, Nicolo Pellegrino's suppliers came from the central area of Malta, and especially from *casal zebbug*. In particular, Andrea Cumbo of *casal zebbug* supplied Nicolo Pellegrino twice. As was the norm, every supplier was bound to deliver his produce to Birgu on the day of the feast of St John the Baptist. Tradesmen like the Noble Nicolo Pellegrino were the protagonists of Malta's expanding trade and prosperity as the islands moved

out of their relative Medieval isolation under the auspices of the Knights of St John.

## The significance of textiles

In the acts of Notary Muscat there was extensive selling and buying of textiles – indeed a 24% share of the whole business transactions. This trade concerned both expensive and refined luxury items, such as *unius curdoni argentei decorati* costing 6 *uncie* 15 *tareni* which the Noble Mario Inguanes bought from the Noble Natale Cassar,<sup>32</sup> as well as more mundane everyday articles, such as 2 *canne* of black material for blankets costing 4 *uncie* 6 *tareni*.<sup>33</sup> The situation was very straightforward. Poor people had to do with coarse homespun as the everyday working garb, made from the least expensive of local resources. Indeed, well into the eighteenth century clothes of the poorer classes were carefully handed down from parent to offspring.<sup>34</sup>

By contrast, the fashion of the better-off people was subject to incessant change and costume everywhere was a persistent reminder of social status.<sup>35</sup> In fact, there was a certain sophistication in the tastes of the upper classes. Men had a passion for berets,<sup>36</sup> while women loved silk<sup>37</sup> and embroidery. There was also an obsession with black cloth. According to Braudel in the sixteenth century the upper class people adopted the black cloth costume inspired by the Spaniards. It was a sign of the political preponderance of the Catholic King's 'world-wide' empire.<sup>38</sup> This might explain the substantial quantities of black cloth that were encountered in the acts under review. Such a situation contrasts sharply with the situation in the mid-fifteenth century when "not a hand's span of black cloth was available in Malta".<sup>39</sup>

25 NAV, NJM, R376/11, ff. 681v-682, (15.iv.1545).

26 NAV, NJM, R376/11, ff. 552v-553, (4.iii.1545).

27 G.F. Abela, *Della Descrizione di Malta*, [Facsimile Edition] (Malta, 1984), 130.

28 NAV, NJM, R376/11, f. 682v, (15.iv.1545).

29 NAV, NJM, R376/11, f. 588v, (15.iii.1545).

30 NAV, NJM, R376/11, f. 682v, (15.iv.1545).

31 NAV, NJM, R376/11, ff. 689v-690, (17.iv.1545).

32 NAV, NJM, R376/11, f. 722v, (29.iv.1545).

33 NAV, NJM, R376/11, f. 688, (17.iv.1545).

34 C. Cassar, 'Clothes, Status and Class – Symbols and Reality'. In N. de Piro & V.A. Cremona (eds.), *Costume in Malta – An History of Fabric, Form and Fashion* (Malta, 1998), 54.

35 Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, 228.

36 NAV, NJM, R376/11, ff. 631v-632, (24.iii.1545); NAV, NJM, R376/11, f. 633v, (26.iii.1545); NAV, NJM, R376/11, f. 638v, (31.iii.1545).

37 NAV, NJM, R376/11, f. 618, (19.iii.1545); NAV, NJM, R376/11, f. 629, (23.iii.1545).

38 Braudel, *Capitalism* ..., 232.

39 G. Wettinger, 'The Young Widow on Gozo who remarried too soon, 1465 – 68', *Melita Historica*, xii, 20 (1997), 141.

**Table 3**  
**The dowry of Ventura Manguin in the Acts of Notary Juliano Muscat, R376/11, 1545.**

<i>Item</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>una cultra bianca</i>	one white blanket
<i>uno mataraczo</i>	one mattress
<i>unu paro di linsola di tila bianca</i>	a pair of white linen sheets
<i>una farsata dicta farde di lana pintata</i>	coloured wool
<i>duj tuvagli di pararj</i>	two tablecloths for embellishment – <i>pararj</i> is a word of Sicilian origin, its modern Italian rendering is <i>abbellirsi</i> (to embellish) <sup>41</sup>
<i>quattro tuvagli pichiuli di pararj</i>	four small tablecloths for embellishment
<i>duj tuvagli grandi cum manita tel Porce</i>	two large tablecloths
<i>duj mindilj</i>	<i>mindilj</i> is a word of Arabic origins, its modern Maltese rendering is <i>mendil</i> – a piece of cloth generally thin and white in colour, and traditionally used for a number of purposes – as a tablecloth or as a large handkerchief to carry bread in it <sup>42</sup>
<i>trij chiumaczi di tila bianca</i>	three white pillows – <i>chiumazzu</i> is a word of Sicilian origin, its modern Italian rendering is <i>guanciale</i> or <i>piumaccio</i> , a small pillow filled with wool or feathers <sup>43</sup>

When Blouet was writing his dissertation, he complained that there was a general lack of source material relating to textiles in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>40</sup> One must remark that this was before notarial acts were tapped as a source for historical research and dowry lists and wills are a major documentary source for local cloth production and consumption because they list large quantities of linen shirts, corsets, handkerchiefs, napkins, towels, sheets, cushion and mattress covers, perhaps spun and woven by the bride herself. The dowry of Ventura Manguin was the most extensive one and is worth quoting in its entirety in Table 3.

An item of particular interest that recurs in these acts is cloth imported from England, referred to as *panni de londres*, to which there are three references. The Noble Nicola Antonio de Noto of Mdina owed the Noble Antonio Barthalo 4 *uncie* 24 *tareni* 17 *grani* for 2 *canne* of black cloth and 5 *palme* of *panni de londres*.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, in the other two cases, it was a resident of Mdina that was buying this London cloth.<sup>45</sup> The presence of such material in Malta confirms Braudel's assertion that the total volume of exchange was small and the prices modest, but questions his belief that the distance travelled by merchandise was short.<sup>46</sup> It is also an early indication of the gradual

40 Blouet, 265.

41 V. Nicotru, *Dizionario Siciliano-Italiano* (Catania, 1883), 604.

42 E. Serracino Inglott, *Il-Miklem Malti*, vi (Malta, 1979), 94.

43 A. Traina, *Nuovo Vocabolario Siciliano-Italiano* (Palermo, 1868), 193.

44 NAV, NJM, R376/11, f. 587v, (13.iii.1545).

45 NAV, NJM, R376/11, f. 689v, (17.iv.1545); R376/11, ff. 765v.-766, (21.v.1545).

46 Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, 236.

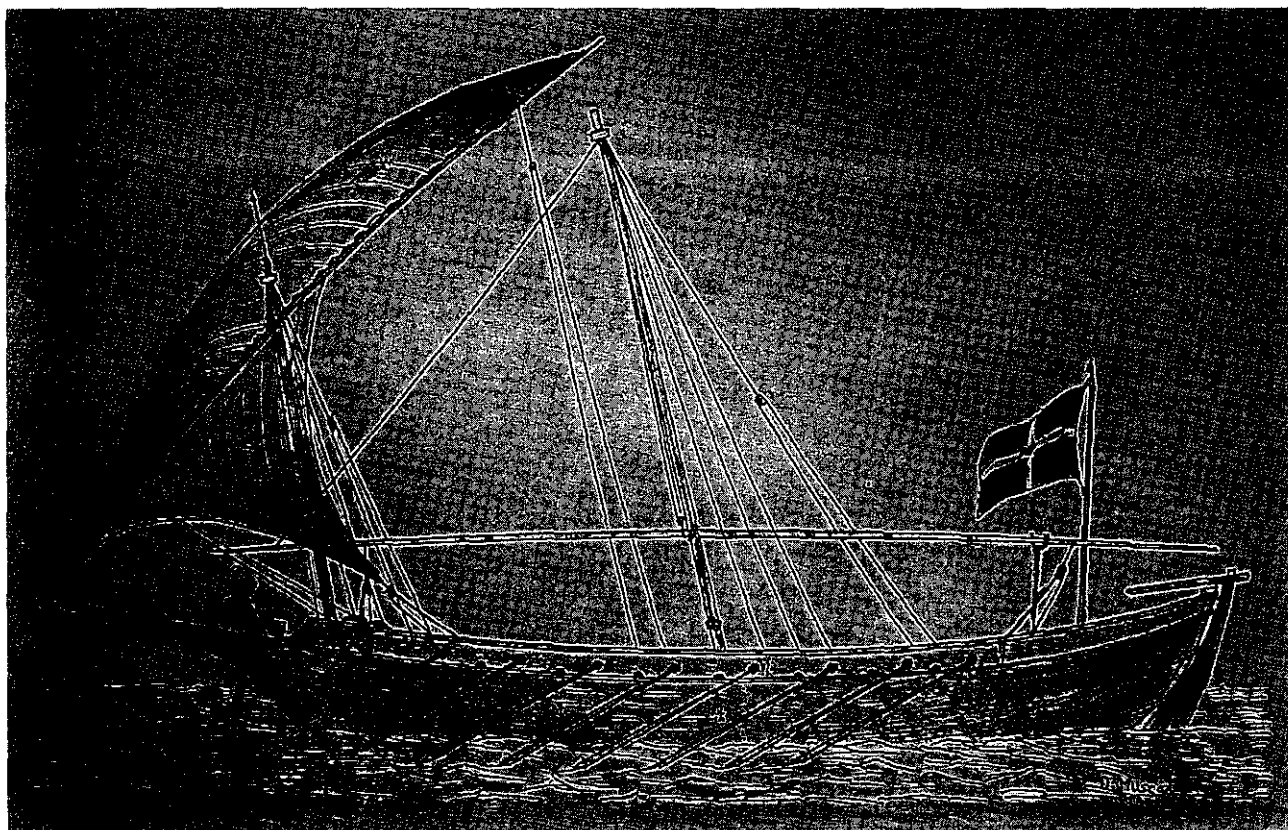
decline of the Mediterranean as it was slowly to be eclipsed by north-western Europe. Significantly, the years 1500 to 1550 saw English shortcloth exports triple.<sup>47</sup>

## Shipping and corsairing

The sea then played a fundamental part in an island's economy and communications with the outside world, so that trade and corsairing were two complementary ventures. Corsairing was legitimate war, authorised either by a formal declaration of war or by letters of marque.<sup>48</sup> It was a very economically rewarding activity<sup>49</sup> and many corsairs also acted as businessmen, alternating between privateering and ordinary trade. In 1429 the *corso* had to be suspended due to the loss of people it was causing. The arrival of the Order of St John in Malta reactivated corsairing activities from Malta which once again contributed

to the economy.<sup>50</sup> The state of shipping and corsairing in the mid-sixteenth century can be assessed through the following two case-studies.

The Honourable Thomaso Xerri and the Noble Matheo de Cali set up a *commenda*-type of partnership between them. This meant that profits and risks were shared by the parties as in a partnership, but otherwise the relation between the parties resembled that of lender and borrower.<sup>51</sup> Thomaso Xerri invested the sum of 29 *uncie* 9 *tareni* 10 *grani* in a trip with a *fusta* to Licata. The money was subdivided as follows: 4 *uncie* for the trip itself, 1 *uncia* 25 *tareni* 10 *grani* for 30 *caschi siculi*, 1 *tareno* 17 *grani* for a *singulo paio* ?, and 23 *uncie* 14 *tareni* for 32 *cantari* of biscuits (*cantarum* 32 *biscotti boni*). All the merchandise had to be delivered at Birgu. The following year on 14 July 1546 the *commenda* as was the practice, came to an end after the two parties had settled their accounts.<sup>52</sup>



**The frigate (lateen). This vessel was very common in the Mediterranean up to the second half of the seventeenth century. The frigates owned by the Noble Antonio Marmara and Nicola Gatana were of this kind.<sup>53</sup>**

47 C.M. Cipolla, *Before the Industrial Revolution – European Society and Economy, 1000 – 1700* (London, 1997), 262.

48 S. Bono, 'Naval Exploits and Privateering'. In V. Mallia-Milanes (ed.), *Hospitaller Malta – Studies on Early Modern Malta and the Order of St. John of Jerusalem* (Malta, 1993), 388 – 9.

49 V. Mallia-Milanes, *Venice and Hospitaller Malta 1530 – 1798 – Aspects of a Relationship* (Malta, 1992), ixx.

50 Blouet, 243 – 4.

51 R.S. Lopez & I.W. Raymond, *Medieval Trade in the Mediterranean World* (New York, 1990), 174.

52 NAV, NJM, R376/11, ff. 810v-811v, (19.vi.1545).

53 Drawing courtesy of Joseph Muscat.

Corsairing was such a profitable business that even the setback of losing a vessel in *Partibus barbarie* did not discourage the Noble Antonio Marmara and Nicola Gatana from setting up a new frigate. Nicola Gatana captained the original frigate, the *Xilidona*, at the time when it was lost. Nonetheless, Antonio Marmara trusted Nicola enough to allow him to captain the new frigate – *ad cursum ad Partes barbarie*. Their venture seems to be a last opportunity for them not to go bankrupt: they were out to take enough booty (*buttinu*) to pay the crew (*ala genti dila dicta fragata*), to pay for the expenses of the *Xilidona* (*pagar tucti li spisi facti in li corpi et armamento tante dila Prima fragata*) and the rest of the spoils to be split between them. The sleeping partner, Antonio, bound Nicola to deliver his spoils at Birgu and not at Tripoli. This might indicate a tendency among corsairs to cheat their sedentary partners by going to Tripoli first, selling some of the booty and then keeping the profits for themselves.<sup>54</sup> Aware of the risks which those who sailed the seas faced, before departing Nicola Gatana nominated the same Noble Antonio Marmara as his procurator in his absence.<sup>55</sup>

## Conclusion – the land and the sea

It is to be noted that by and large, Malta had a monetised economy, not very dependent on bartering. Since in Malta the economy of town and country were so bound up together, money as a unit of exchange was a necessity.<sup>56</sup> The economy of mid-16<sup>th</sup> century Malta shows a system of division of labour between town and countryside, where both peasants and townsmen played the parts of producers-vendors and consumers-purchasers, respectively.<sup>57</sup> The economy hovered between two poles represented by Mdina and Birgu: while Mdina lured the rents from the land, Birgu lured the produce to be exported. Agriculture claimed the lion's share of Malta's economic structure. Like any other agrarian society this meant a constant battle with both the elements of nature – soil sterility, drought, pestilence, and famine (*sterilitatis, siccitatis, pesti, famis*)<sup>58</sup> and the agency

of men – pirates (*classis piratari*)<sup>59</sup> and war (*ignis bellorum*).<sup>60</sup> The island therefore had to expend huge sums of money in order to secure its food supplies from Sicily. At the same time, it developed an export sector made up, at this point in time, primarily of cumin and of corsairing activities, which not only paid for its foodstuffs but also for luxury items, such as *panni de londres*. The question of adequate food supplies became increasingly tied with the proviso of good government which in turn brought about an increased overlapping of the interests and activities of the *Universitas* and the Knights of St John.

People like the cumin merchant the Noble Nicolo Pellegrino, the shipper the Noble Matheo de Cali and the corsairs, the Noble Antonio Marmara and Nicola Gatana, were enterprising individuals who utilised complex trading techniques and prospered from trade rather than from the land. They were the predecessors of the great merchants' houses that would develop after 1565.<sup>61</sup>

### The author

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54 NAV, NJM, R376/11, ff. 776v-777v, (1.vi.1545).

55 NAV, NJM, R376/11, ff. 778-779, (5.vi.1545).

56 H. Kamen, *The Iron Century – Social Changes in Europe 1550 – 1660* (London, 1971), 102.

57 H. Wander, 'Economic Change'. In G.R. Elton (ed.), *The New Cambridge Modern History, II – The Reformation 1520 – 1559*, (Cambridge, 1990), 28.

58 NAV, NJM, R376/11, ff. 715-716v, (24.iv.1545).

59 NAV, NJM, R376/11, ff. 715-716v, (24.iv.1545).

60 NAV, NJM, R376/11, ff. 619-620v, (19.iii.1545).

61 Cassar, *Society, Culture and Identity*, 29 – 62.